

# ***“Welcoming the Stranger in Our Midst”***

## **A Call to Action by the Leaders of Maryland’s Faith Communities**

Serve God . . . and do good to orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer that you meet.

**(Koran 4:36)**

The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

**(The Hebrew Bible, Leviticus 19:34)**

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

**(New Testament, Matthew 25:35)**

We are people of faith.

We are bishops and judicatory leaders of denominations, pastors of churches, rabbis of synagogues, imams of mosques and leaders of faith-based community service agencies. At the invitation of Gov. Martin O’Malley, we came together in Annapolis on July 21 and July 28 to make a faith-based response to the humanitarian crisis at the southwestern border of the United States. We are grateful to the Governor for calling us together.

Children and youth, so-called “unaccompanied minors,” have been arriving for many years, but the numbers have risen dramatically with as many as 60,000 individuals crossing the border since October of 2013. These children and young persons are fleeing their home countries in Central America because of wide-spread violence and an absence of government protection and services. Due to the powerful drug cartel presence, the homicide rate in Honduras, for example, is the highest in the world, 90.4 per 100,000 according to the Global Study on Homicide 2013. The situation is equally desperate in El Salvador and Guatemala.

These are innocent children fleeing for their very lives, some as young as five or six years old. They are refugees, often looking to be reunited with family members that are already here. The unaccompanied minors arriving at our border are not criminals trying to escape the law. They are not economic migrants looking for better job opportunities. These children are entitled to humane treatment by our country, its citizens and its

government. Anti-immigrant slogans and hate speech have no place in a civilized society where most everybody is either an immigrant or the descendant of immigrants.

Already 2, 205 children have been placed with families in Maryland. According to state officials, a few thousand more of these children may be received in our State. The top priority will be the reunification of unaccompanied minors with their families in Maryland. The second preference will be to place these children with families through the federal foster care system. While it may be possible to house many children in large shelters, this is clearly not the ideal setting for caring for children through their teenage years. Instead, the most urgent need right now is for foster homes to care for a child or two while they away their legal processing or reuniting with their families.

Government cannot do it alone. As leaders of Maryland's faith communities we call on people of faith and all people of good will in our state to...

1. LEARN: Learn about the humanitarian crisis and the challenges facing unaccompanied minors and their families. Go to [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org) for information.
2. EDUCATE: Misinformation is a major obstacle to providing support and protection to unaccompanied children. Dispel dangerous myths by educating others in your faith communities and neighborhoods on the realities of this crisis.
3. PRAY: Encourage your family, congregation, and community to lift up these children and their families in prayer. Designate a specific day or week for prayer. Include the needs of these children in your prayers during religious services.
4. ADVOCATE: Write to your U.S. government officials; meet with them or their local staff to urge them to champion policies that protect children and families. Contact your Representative and Senators by calling the Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121 or the White House: (866) 473-5915.
5. SHARE: Detention centers are no place for families. If you speak Spanish, consider becoming a foster parent and sheltering a child. If you, your congregation, or your network have access to a residence such as a vacant parsonage or can support the efforts of others, help to set up small shelters.

Two of our faith-based agencies have taken the lead and will be glad to hear from you:

Catholic Charities: [www.catholiccharities-md.org](http://www.catholiccharities-md.org) or 443-825-3433

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service: [www.lirs.org/actoflove](http://www.lirs.org/actoflove) or 877-291-1061

For additional resources, go to: [www.maryland.gov](http://www.maryland.gov)

We are seeing the results of our failed government policies in Central America from the 1980s and of human trafficking, gang violence, and organized crime. History will hold us accountable ... and our God will hold us accountable and ask whether we treated the stranger among us with dignity, honor, and love as the Holy Scriptures of all of our faith traditions call us to do.

We are people of faith. Let us respond to this crisis in faith, compassion and generosity!

**Endorsed by the following faith leaders:**

(as of July 28, 2014; list in development)

Bishop Wolfgang D. Herz-Lane  
Delaware-Maryland Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and  
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The Rt. Rev. Eugene Sutton  
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The Rev. Dr. John R. Deckenback  
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The Rev. Dr. G. Wilson Gunn, Jr.  
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The Rev. Craig N. Palmer  
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Y. Maria Martinez  
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